



TODAY'S SUNBEAM

Corzine, Andrews to fight VX plan

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U.S. Sen. Jon Corzine and Rep. Robert Andrews on Tuesday vowed to do everything in their power to prevent the U.S. Army and the DuPont Co. from disposing of the remains of an internationally banned nerve agent in Salem County.

The Army and DuPont claim the work -- neutralizing 1,200 tons of VX compound and treating the leftover chemical, hydrolysate, a corrosive wastewater akin to a household drain cleaner -- can be done without any threat to public health at two sites: First at the Army Chemical Agent Disposal Facility in Newport, Ind., and then at the DuPont Chambers Works' DuPont Secure Environment Treatment Facility in Deepwater.

Corzine, the Democratic nominee for governor, and Andrews, a nine-term Democrat who hopes to succeed Corzine in the Senate, contend the VX nerve agent should be treated and disposed of in Indiana rather than be transported 742 miles to New Jersey, treated and discharged into the Delaware River.

"The idea that we want to take any risk with the environmental safety of people in South Jersey and Delaware, and those that live and make their home in and around the Delaware River, is just inconceivable," Corzine, D-N.J., said Tuesday at a news conference in his Senate office.

If elected governor, Corzine claimed, he would use his authority in Trenton to block the approval of any and all state environmental permits needed by DuPont to treat the Army's hydrolysate and then release it into the Delaware.

Appearing side-by-side with Corzine, Andrews stated, "We understand that we have an international treaty obligation to dispose of the VX chemical weapons, and we frankly commend the United States Army for its leadership in pushing that process forward in Newport, Indiana. We do not agree that it makes sense to transfer a problem that exists in Indiana a third of the way across the country ... and into New Jersey. We just don't think that makes any sense."

The Army last month began neutralizing 1,200 tons of VX stockpiles at the Newport, Ind., facility, to comply with the International Chemical Weapons Convention.

That compact, ratified by the Senate eight years ago, makes the United States one of 164 nations to ban the manufacture, use and stockpiling of chemical weapons and nerve agents, including VX.

Generally stored in liquid form, VX assaults the central nervous system and interrupts respiration. It is toxic enough that an amount no greater than one-fifth of a raindrop would kill a human being.

The United States, Russia and France possess VX. Fears that Saddam Hussein had failed to account for 1.5 tons of VX contributed to President Bush's drive for war in early 2003.

Corzine and Andrews on Tuesday stressed that they supported the treaty banning chemical weapons and nerve agents.

But they said they did not believe the Army and DuPont could neutralize the VX through a heating process; transport the remaining hydrolysate to New Jersey via truck; treat the chemical a second time to remove phosphonates, or catalysts in the neutralization process; and dispose of the remaining material into the Delaware River without risking a public health problem.

They noted that the Centers for Disease Control and the Environmental Protection Agency have not yet given a green light to the Army or DuPont. An April 2005 report by the CDC cited concerns about the ecological impact of the Delaware River discharge plan.

Anthony Farina, a DuPont spokesman, said DuPont officials have been meeting with experts at EPA and CDC to discuss DuPont's patented phosphonate-removal process and the overall safety of the Army-DuPont plan to dispose of the treated hydrolysate in the Delaware.

Farina emphasized that DuPont "would not accept one drop" of hydrolysate from the Army if the firm believed there was any risk the Newport, Ind., compound were still contaminated with VX.

That assurance fails to generate confidence in South Jersey. Corzine and Andrews cited a June 10 accident that the Army disclosed little more than a month after its VX neutralization project began.

Workers spilled 30 gallons of still-dangerous VX and hydrolysate into a holding area. The 30-gallon mixture was contained in a cubicle designed to prevent an escape of toxic chemicals. "No agent was released outside the containment area and there was no danger to workers or the community," the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency said in a statement dated June 11.

The National Academy of Sciences recommends eight different procedures for neutralizing VX. The Army's plan ranks eighth out of eight possible approaches, Andrews says. He claims the Army has failed to prove that the other seven options wouldn't work as well and wouldn't be just as cost-effective.

Corzine says the neutralized VX should never be transferred to New Jersey, no matter how it is treated.

"First of all, there's the alternative of neutralizing this and storing neutralized VX in Newport, Indiana," Corzine said. "I could be flip and say, 'Why not put it in the Ohio River?' But that's not what we would recommend. I think there are alternatives that are safer, certainly, than shipping. We've already seen this 30-gallon leak."

Mary Mears, spokeswoman for EPA, said her agency still is waiting for additional data from the Army and DuPont. The CDC report in April noted that DuPont had focused its analysis of the VX plan exclusively on human health risks, without providing an assessment about hydrolysate's impact on marine life.

Jeff Lindblad, a spokesman for the Army Chemical Materials Agency, emphasized the Army's desire to work with DuPont, which has been operating its nationally unique industrial-waste treatment facility at the Chambers Works in Deepwater for 27 years, treating up to 15 million gallons of industrial wastewater from manufacturing businesses each day.

"The Army chose to partner with an existing and permitted commercial treatment facility that has the experience and knowledge, as well as existing and proven treatment technologies, to safely treat and dispose of materials such as hydrolysate in a safe and environmentally friendly manner," Lindblad wrote in an e-mail note.

"This decision is supported by recommendations made by the National Research Council. No contract has been awarded to any commercial treatment facility at this time. The proposed contract between the Army and DuPont will not be awarded until the CDC and EPA concerns have been addressed," Lindblad added.

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